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SUBJECT: BELARUS WEEKLY POL/ECON REPORT - November 21, 2008

11. The following are brief items of interest compiled by Embassy Minsk.

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International Relations

12. MFA Says Lukashenka's Comment on Iskander Missiles Misinterpreted

Foreign Ministry spokesman Andrei Popov stated on November 16 that Lukashenka's November 11 comment to the Wall Street Journal that on surface-to-surface medium-range Iskander missiles for Belarus was misinterpreted. Popov said Lukashenka did not say that Belarus would deploy Iskander missiles as a part of Russia's efforts to oppose the deployment of the U.S. anti-defense system in Europe. According to Popov, Lukashenka said only that funds permitting,

Belarus will replace existing missile systems with Iskander missiles regardless of Russian plans.

Civil Society

13. Lawyer Unable to See Hunger-Striking Aleksander Barazanka in Pretrial Detention Center

Alexander Barazanka's lawyer was unable to see him on November 19 in pretrial detention center in Minsk because no formal permission was granted by the judge. While his lawyer plans to observe all formalities, Alexander started a hunger strike on November 17 to require his immediate release. Criminal charges have been brought against him for violating public order during the mass protest in January 2008 in defense of entrepreneurs' rights.

14. Judges Involved in Corruption Schemes Still Working

According to the Belapan news agency, three judges of the Tsentralny district court in Minsk still perform their duties after Lukashenka personally blamed them last week for issuing unfair verdicts in favor of corrupt senior Prosecutor's office employees. Supreme Court officials told Belapan that they cannot be dismissed until after Lukashenka signs an edict to this effect. In the meantime, some of the verdicts cited have already been annulled. All three are on the visa ban list for their unfair decisions regarding democratic activists.

15. NGOs Denied Registration in 2008 Due to Inadequate Application Efforts

According to information posted on the website of Belarus' Justice Ministry (MOJ), the principal reasons for denying registration to NGOs in 2008 were problems with application paperwork and poor pre-registration efforts. According to the MOJ, in many instances, application papers were forged, as some reported participants of founding conferences did not actually attend them, although their names and signatures were included on application documents. These allegations allegedly applied often to pro-democratic NGOs.

16. Popular Front Denied Permission to Commemorate 1920 Anti-Bolshevik Uprising in Slutsk

The Belarusian Popular Front failed to secure permission to commemorate on November 23 the anniversary of the anti-communist uprising suppressed by the Bolsheviks in late 1920. The chairman of the Slutsk district government (Minsk region) reportedly did not allow a mass to take place in central Slutsk, although such commemorations were often held in previous years. BPF activists nonetheless intend to appeal the denial and plan to proceed with preparations.

17. Militia Disperses Protests in Central Minsk on Solidarity Day, Makes No Detentions

Several opposition youth groups commemorated the disappearances of democratic leaders on Solidarity Day November 16 at various locations in central Minsk. Police pushed protesters away from Jakub Kolas and Oktyabrskaya Squares and dispersed them as they attempted to approach a pretrial detention center to demand the release of Aleksander Barazanka. Similar protests were reported in Soligorsk, Mozyr, Kobrin and several other cities. No detentions were reported.

Domestic Economy

18. The National Bank Will Not Accelerate Privatization of State-Owned Banks

The Head of the National Bank's information office Anatoly Drozdov told a news conference November 17 that the Bank has no intention to accelerate privatization of the country's four largest state-owned banks. Twenty percent stocks in Belarusbank, Belagroprombank, Belpromstroibank and Belinvestbank will only be sold to strategic investors who can attract resources several times higher than the amount paid for the stock.

Foreign Trade and Investment

¶9. Anti-dumping Investigation May Damage Belarusian Pipe Mills

According to press reports, the European Commission launched on November 19 an anti-dumping investigation with regard to pipe mills in Turkey, Ukraine and Belarus that supply products to the EU markets. The verdict is expected to be announced in about nine months and may cause serious economic damage to three Belarusian pipe mills.

¶10. Government Pleased With Preliminary Results of London Investment Forum

On November 19, Prime Minister Sergei Sidorsky announced at a news conference in London that preliminary results of the Investment Forum were far beyond his expectations. The actual number of participants was double the government's initial expectations. Sidorsky stated that participants "felt the spirit of changes in Belarus" and would like to invest. The Prime Minister specifically mentioned some unnamed investors from the Arab world as well as the U.S. Caterpillar, which allegedly would like to sell its products in Belarus.

¶11. Foreign Trade Deficit Through September Above USD 2.4 Billion

According to official statistics issued on November 17, Belarus' foreign trade deficit through September was 2.474 billion, one billion more than the GOB planned for 2008. In particular, the commodity trade deficit was USD 3.738 billion, while trade in services had a surplus of USD 1.263 billion.

¶12. Latvian Prime Minister to Visit Belarus in 2009

Latvia's Ambassador to Belarus Maira Mora told a news conference in Minsk on November 20 that the Latvian Prime Minister intends to visit Belarus during 2009. The main objective will be discussion of electric energy supplies to Latvia as this will be a critical issue for the country following the closure of the Ignalina nuclear power plant in Lithuania scheduled for 2009. Belarusian and Latvian premiers discussed the issue preliminarily on November 12 during the Belarusian Prime Minister's visit to Riga.

Quote of the Week

¶13. President Lukashenka greeted the official Belarusian Union of Journalists on the Union's 50th anniversary and welcomed its members' constructive approach to forming public opinion in Belarus. Lukashenka said:

"Unfortunately, not all mass media work for the benefit of the Belarusian people and seek to strengthen a young sovereign state... It is critical in a contemporary world to provide balanced and precise information and fully realize the responsibility you take for each written or spoken word."

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